Gracey

What is Zenana Work

by

Mrs. J. T. Gracey

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What is a *zenana*, and what is *zenana* work?

At the organization of woman's foreign missionary work a few years ago, very few persons were familiar with the terms "*zenana*" or "*zenana* work," or what they represented, but to-day these are expressions understood by all classes.

Zenana is a Persian word, meaning the apartments of the women. For many centuries the women of high-caste families in India have been doomed to spend their life in apartments built expressly for them, separate from the rest of the house. The term "*zenana*" signifies the same as *harem* in Turkey.

The *zenana* is not an institution of Indian origin. The Hindoos owe to their Moham-

medan invaders this blemish on their social system and family life. Before this invasion Hindoo women were not enslaved, hidden away and downtrodden, but when the Moslem came the *zenana*, with its seclusion, became a necessity as security against wholesale destruction of the social life.

The *zenana* is that part of the house of a native in which the women live, entirely distinct from that occupied by the men, and usually having the appearance of a prison; for the windows, if any, are very small and high, so as to effectually preclude the possibility of the women looking out, or of any one from the outside looking in. When a Hindoo marries he takes his wife to his father's house, and in case there are several sons, this makes a large household. These younger women become subject to the older ones. Often three or four generations are thus living in the same house.

A *zenana* is simply indescribable from the fact that no two are alike, and not one seems to have been built on any supposable plan or shape. A collection of dirty courtyards, dark corners, breakneck staircases, filthy outhouses, entries all overlaid with rubbish, or occupied by half-clad native servants stretched about on charpoys (native beds), or on the ground indifferently, narrow verandas, and unfurnished or semi-furnished

very small rooms, without anything homelike or attractive, — such is a *zenana* and its surroundings.

The approach to the house is often so intricate, rough, or small, that one cannot reach it in a vehicle, but must go on foot. Even in the large and fine residences of the rich, one can always tell when getting near the rooms allotted to the women by the dirty, miserable appearance of the walls, staircases, and courts.

Women who are thus kept in seclusion are also called *purdah women*. Purdah simply means curtain. In a climate like India, ventilated rooms are a necessity of existence. Doors, therefore, are but little used, and in their stead, curtains are suspended in the doorways, with a space at the top for the circulation of air. Hindoo women spend their whole lives behind these purdahs, or curtains, hence this name.

As soon as a woman in India is married, custom requires that thenceforward she shall no more go outside the walls of her home, save on very special occasions. Her marriage takes place when she is still quite a child. From the age of eight or nine years the women of the higher and middle classes are doomed to a life of seclusion and ignorance. In the outer life the *zenana* woman has no part, no recognized position at all. She has little

to do, so the dreary hours are spent in sleeping, cooking, making garlands for the gods, looking at her jewels, or braiding her hair.

Forty millions of women are to-day thus shut up in India, having little or no intercourse with the outside world. Her position is not an enviable one. Secluded in the *zenana* she silently suffers wrongs and yields most unquestioning submission, not only to husband, but to her mother-in-law. If she is a woman of some character and strength of mind, this changes as she grows older, especially if she becomes the mother of sons; but while she is young she must not speak in the presence of the older women unless spoken to; she must not unveil herself; and, in fact, she has no independent life, but is ever subject to the will of other members of the household. They are the slaves of tyrannical and absurd superstitions, which takes away freedom of body and mind. A Hindoo woman once said of the life they lead in their *zenanas*, "It is like that of a frog in a well — everywhere there is beauty, but we cannot see it — it is hid from us." The book, the letter, the school, the scroll of music, the line from the absent friend, the power of spending an hour in mental feast or spiritual edification over some silent page, were all boons enjoyed by the men, but denied to the women. Woman's

condition is thus summarized: "girls are despised in their birth, subject to ill-treatment and the chance of infanticide in their earlier years; bartered away to some unknown husband, condemned to lifelong imprisonment, ignorance, and drudgery; neglected in sickness, looked upon as unclean, polluted beings in health, and shut out from communion with the enjoyments of nature.

Here is the outline! The unwelcome birth; the child marriage; the lonely wife-life; its vacant, listless drag; motherhood; the horrors of widowhood; the gloomy future; life without hope, and death in darkest despair. It is not astonishing that great ignorance should be the result of *zenana* life. One *zenana* worker tells of meeting a woman who had never seen a river. All attempts to explain seemed to fail, for so closely had she been kept prisoner all her life, that she had no idea of running water. She begged to be carried in a closed palanquin down to the Ganges, so that she might see it. Her desire was gratified, and with unbounded wonder and delight she gazed upon the strange scene. Mrs. E. W. Parker tells of a woman who never saw a book, and asked her many questions concerning it.

Occasionally there comes a voice from the *zenana* that gives an insight into the life of those confined therein.

The following pathetic cry came from a Hindoo widow in Calcutta who, in her sorrow and solitude, wrote out the prayer that has touched many hearts. She was one of the few that could write, and had evidently received some instruction, and believed a divine ear would hear her complaint. She says, "O Lord, hear my prayer! No one has turned an eye on the oppression that we poor women suffer, though with weeping and crying and desire we have turned to all sides, hoping that some would save us. No one has lifted up his eyelids to look upon us, or inquire into our case. We have searched above and below, but Thou art the only one who will hear our complaint; Thou knowest our impatience, our degradation, our dishonor. O Lord, inquire into our case! For ages dark ignorance has brooded over our minds and spirits; like a cloud of dust it rises and wraps us round, and we are like prisoners in an old and mouldering house, choked and buried in the dust of custom, and we have no strength to go out. Bruised and beaten, we are like the dry husks of the sugar cane when the sweet juice has been extracted. All-knowing God, hear our prayer, forgive our sins, and give us power of escape, that we may see something of Thy world. O Father, when shall we be set free from this jail? For what sin have we been born to live in this prison? From

thy throne of judgment justice flows, but it does not reach us; is this our lifelong misery? Only *in*-justice comes near us.

"O Thou Hearer of Prayer, *if* we have sinned against Thee, forgive! but we are too ignorant to know what sin is. Must the punishment of sin fall on those who are too ignorant to know what it is? O great Lord! our name is written with drunkards, with lunatics, with imbeciles, with the very animals; as they are not responsible, we are not. Criminals confined in the jails for life are happier than we, for they know something of Thy world. They were not born in prison, but we have not for one day, no, not even in our dreams, seen Thy world; to us it is nothing but a name; and not having seen the world, we cannot know Thee, its Maker. Those who have seen Thy works may learn to understand Thee, but for us, who are shut in, it is not possible to learn to know Thee. We see only the four walls of the house. Shall we call them the world, or India? We have been born in this jail, we have died here, and are dying.

"O Father of the world, hast Thou not created us? Or has, perchance, some other god made us? Dost Thou care only for men? Hast Thou no thought for us women? Why hast Thou created us male and female? O Almighty, hast Thou not power to make

us other than we are, that we too might have some share in the comforts of this life? The cry of the oppressed is heard even in the world. Then canst Thou look upon our victim hosts, and shut Thy doors of Justice? O God Almighty and Unapproachable, think upon Thy mercy, which is like a vast sea, and remember us. O Lord save us, for we cannot bear our hard lot; many of us have killed ourselves, and we are still killing ourselves. O God of mercy, our prayer to Thee is this, that the curse may be removed from the women of India. Create in the hearts of men some sympathy, that our lives may no longer be passed in vain longing, that, saved by thy mercy, we may taste something of the joys of life."

This woman but voices the feelings of thousands of her sisters.

Shut up in the *zenanas* of India are multitudes of Hindoo widows, children from eight and ten years old and upwards. Heathenism is cruel; it is notably so to the widow. Here is the complaint of one, who had, in exceptional circumstances, learned to write. She says so pathetically: —

"If by chance my face is seen early in the morning, I prove a curse. If through haste or by accident my veil falls from my head, I am chained with a hundred bands of scolding. Every visitor to the house speaks of me iron-

ically and treats me with disdain. From every word I speak offence is taken. My heart has become sore from the piercing of these bitter words. I am deprived of every pleasure. While every one else in the house puts on dresses of different colors, and plays, laughs, and talks among the company, I alone, the most wretched and full of grief, am deprived of such enjoyments. If even by mistake a spot of color is seen upon my raiment, it causes trouble. In the house one woman will be engaged in adorning herself in fine robes, another will be busy combing her hair, blacking her eyes and teeth, another will be making the house ring with the tinkling of her foot jewels and ankle ornaments, while I am condemned to sit in a corner and weep alone with my broken heart. Even this comfort it is difficult for me to indulge in, for if any one should happen to see me weeping he would consider it a bad omen and curse me for it. The will of my persecutors is that I should neither scream nor weep, but die alone in my misery. While the whole family enjoys eating delicious food, I am served with *fried dal* and coarse bread. I am strictly forbidden the comfort of sleeping upon a bedstead, but a mat upon the floor and a coarse piece of carpet are my bedding. The wretched barber's wife shaves my head daily. On every festive occasion and at weddings every one is present

but me. The women whose husbands are alive take the lead in all ceremonies. One sings, one plays on the musical instruments, another puts on the holiday costume, another primps with pride before the looking-glass, while I am shut up in my room to prevent the ill omen which would be the result of my face having been seen. Who can be more wretched than I? Death comes to all, but I am deprived of that blessing also. This is the rainy season, the rain falls heavily; my equals, dressed with gay skirts and colored veils, with their fingers dyed red, are singing gayly the songs of this season of the year. Showers of tears flow from my eyes. I feel that some one has broken my heart; it is withered like the kammal (lotus) flower. I exist, but my life is useless; no flowers, no fruits. I have no rest, not even for a single day. I am as thin as a thorn; my body has become like a skeleton, and yet I am abhorred by others, and they are disgusted at the sight of me. I look upon all sides, but find no comforter. There is no one to inquire into my condition, and no one to wipe away my tears. Our gracious Queen Victoria takes pity upon all others. The cries of unfortunate widows like myself have not yet reached her ears. The Lord Jesus Christ gave life to the dead, but His followers do not attempt to relieve us from our sufferings. In what hope shall I

spend the days of my life? How can the ship be anchored in the midst of the tempest? 'The boat is in the midst of the river, but there is no captain.' The government prosecutes the person who shows cruelty to animals deprived of utterance, but no notice is taken of the sufferings and cruelties which we women endure. Alas! that dear comforter, Hope, can do us no good.

"A Christian widow hopes to meet with her husband in Heaven after death, but in our Hindoo religion there is no hope of such a meeting. No one listens. To whom shall I complain? Before whom shall I go? O God! what shall I do?"

How are these women in their ignorance and seclusion reached? By the ministry of Christian women. By *zenana* work is meant simply carrying to them what they cannot come forth to receive, a Christian education. It is telling to these secluded ones the "sweet story of old" which ever brings life, light, and liberty. This method of taking the Gospel to the homes of India's women is one of the most important agencies in bringing India to Christ. It penetrates into the very heart of the community, and is revolutionizing the homes of that country.

For long years missionaries had been at work, and had preached in public, taught in public, and had established schools, and thus

influenced the men and boys of the family; but the women could not be reached, for the male missionary could not enter the house. Only the poorest women who labor in the fields, and perform their own household duties, could listen to the word of truth as proclaimed by the missionary. On their way to and from the bazaar or market, or rice-field, they could stop and listen on the edge of the crowd, but that was almost at the expense of their respectability. Society in India is such that woman must learn of woman if she would preserve her reputation.

There was a deep conviction among the missionaries of all societies that the home must be reached. As was surmised, this very suggestion met with great opposition at first. It was foreign to Hindoo custom. Some said if the women were taught it would cause insubordination in families, that women would become unmanageable, and, above all, women could not learn; there was no use making the effort, for they were little above the brutes.

But a brighter day has dawned for the *zenana* woman.

About fifty years ago the wives of several missionaries in Southern India established schools for girls, which were successful to some extent. They met in their attempts difficulties, obstacles, and scorn. Much of the work had to be done secretly; but it was a begin-

ning. The modern *zenana* movement was inaugurated about 1856 by Mrs. Mullens of Calcutta, the daughter of an English missionary, who won the honorable title of the "Apostle of the *zenanas*." She led the way, and now every well-equipped mission has its *zenana* work.

At first it seemed a herculean task to impress upon the women the fact that they could receive instruction, and that some one felt a deep interest in their welfare.

"Oh," said one, "we are like animals; we can work and then we can die."

Another, "We are in soul-slavery, degraded, ignorant, and superstitious. Why should we learn; we are only women?"

The *zenana* teacher is now welcomed everywhere, and her visits seem to bring life and brightness to those dull homes, while her sympathy and advice are greatly prized. One woman said to her teacher, "It is a sunshiny day when you come, and cloudy when you are absent." Another, "I am so glad to see you because you bring in with you a breath of the fresh outer air; I think I should be stifled now if I did not see you once a week."

Some of these schools in the home present a strange mixture of pupils; there are little girls of four and five who learn with the woman of thirty and forty. One missionary tells of teaching two, the child and the grand-

mother. She says, "I could only call and give these two a lesson once during the week. We sat in a low-roofed room, often with the wind and the rain coming in upon us from every crevice of the dilapidated mud walls. However, they did persevere, when one day the little girl's father peremptorily ordered her to give up her books, saying, 'She talks only of Christ and Christianity, and my mother has given up her idol worship.'"

Many of the women, the younger ones especially, have had their eyes opened, and, realizing their position, are pleading to be taught. In many *zenanas* to-day the women may be found with their books and their work, mother and daughter learning their lessons together, some working, some reading well some story that has been translated into their language, and, as a consequence, cheerful and happy, because of the little ray of Christian light that has broken in on them.

Many thousands of women are so influenced by the teachings they receive through the *zenana* missionary and the Bible women, that, although not nominally Christian, they have given up their old superstitions, and are eagerly examining the new faith. Many thousands more, through contact with education and intelligence in the persons of their own children and husbands, are unsettled,

restless, anxious, wondering "whether these things are so or no." Many others have consciously and thoroughly renounced heathenism, discarded its ceremonies, and given up its forms of idolatry, while a large number have come out and made public profession of their faith in Christ, and others are Christians secretly.

The *zenana* missionary can tell of many touching instances in which her pupils have withstood persecution, scorn, and threats rather than deny their newly-found faith. We, in this highly-favored Christian land, can hardly comprehend what it is for a Hindoo woman to make a profession of Christianity. In many cases it is the commencement of a persecution, which ends in her being literally thrust out upon the world, homeless, defenceless, and friendless.

"Great and effectual" doors are open everywhere throughout India. Shall we enter them? The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church twenty-five years ago commenced, and has carried on, a great work, entering many *zenanas*, and has under instruction hundreds and thousands of women. There are many who have been trained by this society who are now mothers of families at the head of Christian homes, where the Bible, lying on the table, is in keeping with the civilized air

and the cleanliness and neatness of all the appointments; also native Bible women, actively visiting poor and rich of their own people in their own homes; also teachers who can work among their own sisters in city and village with a power no foreigner can easily acquire. This work among the women is the hope of India.